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The TENNESSEE CONSERVATIONIST



Unique TN History Preserved at the Carter Mansion

On a quiet residential road in Elizabethton stands an old home-place along the banks of the Watauga River. It presents itself with dignity and a gentle gracefulness to those who visit or pass by on their travels. The John and Landon Carter Mansion has stood at this original location since it was built between 1775 and 1780 on what is now named the Broad Street Extension.

As you step onto the grounds of the mansion, with the sounds and sights of the city behind you, you will quickly find yourself immersed in the history, the experiences, and the memories of those who called these grounds their home.

Not only will a visit to the Carter Mansion provide you with fascinating information and insight into the lives of our ancestors, it may also become an inspirational experience. Looking beyond the documented history of our past, it is here we can truly appreciate the struggle, the dedication, the strength of will and body, and the knowledge of the settlers who journeyed west of the Appalachian Mountains to make a new home and a new life for their families. These are the people who deserve the credit for bringing pride, respect and admiration to the mansion and the settlements in this region during the 18th century.

It was during this era that our country, our laws, our government, and our present way of life did not exist. Running to the store to pick up a loaf of bread or shopping in a local mall for clothing was not an option. Instead, survival was the dominant theme in the day-to-day lives of the settlers. If you chose to eat, you would need to raise a vegetable garden, hunt and engage in the preservation of foods for the fall, winter and spring months. Blankets, clothing, and the like were made by first spinning your own thread and then weaving the thread into cloth prior to creating a finished garment. Colors were found in nature to create dyes, along with medicines derived from native plants and hand-dipped candles provided light.

This lifestyle did not come without a few hassles either. At this time, King George the III of England forbade the European colonists to cross and settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. Those who choose to leave the British cols, a decision that the Native Americans felt was negative to their people.

Prior to the arrival of John Carter to this new frontier, the Native Americans first called these lands their home. Called the Watauga Old Fields, most of the lands that are now in the heart of Elizabethton and the surrounding communities were settled by Native American tribes and families. The "old fields" encompassed a large area of land spanning from the mouth of Stoney Creek (three miles east of the Carter house), down the river to the mouth of Buffalo Creek (approximately eight miles). Their clearing can be traced back to days before the Cherokee began hunting and living on these lands, for their history indicates that the area was already cleared when their people first arrived here.

Early records show that the first permanent European settlers arrived in the lower Watauga River area in 1769, with the first recorded family being William and Lydia Bean. A year or two later, John Carter and his partner, William Parker, established a trading post in "Carter's Valley" on the Holston River, in today's Hawkins County. By 1772, Carter was in the Sycamore Shoals area of the Watauga Settlement, the year the famous Watauga Association was formed. Upon his arrival there were approximately 70 families living along the Watauga River.

The mansion was built between the years of 1775 and 1780, while Carter presumably lived in a smaller structure that remained standing beside it until the second half of the 20th century.

Although Carter's past is somewhat of a mystery, one can assume that he came from a notable background when they view this home. Settlers along the Watauga River settlement were living in small log cabins with dirt floors and mud and stick fireplaces; cabins which were about the size of just one room of the mansion, the Great Hall.

The Carter Mansion is a home rich in the history of this region, along with that of our nation. The structure has earned many distinctions, which include being the oldest frame house in the state of Tennessee, in addition to being the first with glass windows.

It is amazing to know that 90 percent of the interior of the home is authentic, giving us the opportunity to view an architectural style that is remarkable for the place and the era in which it was built. Many rooms boast denticular molding, fluted pilasters, chair railing, raised wall panels, and crown molding. Two of the downstairs fireplaces have elaborately detailed hand-carved mantles. The mantle in the Great Hall is similar to one that could have been seen in Tidewater, Virginia, prior to 1765.

The upstairs master bedroom is noted for its remarkable detail and decoration, for "private" living spaces usually did not receive this much attention. The walls of this room have been stained to look like pink Italian marble; the lower panels painted with fine black lines to give the appearance of inlay and wood grain.

Of particular interest are the two "naÔve" paintings over the fireplace in the downstairs study and the upstairs master bedroom. These early paintings, executed by an amateur artist, are considered the oldest in the state. They are painted directly onto the wall panel, rather than framed on canvas. The one upstairs has been exposed to the elements for over 200 years, is very dark, but still viewable. But by a stroke of luck, the downstairs painting was painted over for many years, protecting it from smoke, light, and other elements that would have dulled it over time.

During the restoration of the house in the 1970s, it was discovered. In order to safely preserve this unique work of art, Cynthia Kelsey Stowe of The Cumberland Art Conservation Center, was hired to preserve and uncover the painting. Working with Q-tips and cotton balls, she slowly brought this remarkable work back to life!

Within the walls of the house, noggins, or mud bricks were found during its restoration. Many theories exist as to why they were used, but the possibility exists that they were included to keep varmints out of the house, provide insulation, or possibly fortify the house against attack during battle. Outbuildings surrounded the home including a

kitchen, blacksmith shop, icehouse, servant's quarters, smokehouse, outhouse and woodshed.

In viewing this house and realizing John Carter's personal accomplishments, it becomes apparent that he must have come from a wealthy, educated background. Many believe that his roots are from the Tidewater of Virginia and that he could be related in some fashion to Robert "King" Carter, then the wealthiest man in the Tidewater area.

Whatever his background might have been, he was a man who is remembered for making a difference in the military, business and political growth of this region and our nation. When the Watauga Association was formed in 1772, he acted as Chairman of the Court. The signing of the Watauga Petition was unprecedented for this era, for it represented the first democratic government of free American-born men west of the Appalachian Mountains. Interestingly, this approach to democratic government preceded the signing of the American Declaration of Independence by four years and the Constitution of the United States of America by 14 years.

Carter served as a commander at Fort Watauga, chaired the Committee of Safety, and was a representative to the North Carolina General Assembly during the Revolutionary War. Acting as the entry taker for the settlement, he entered his ownership of a 640-acre land warrant (one square mile) for the tract of land upon which the Carter Mansion now stands, on December 23, 1775. Carter and his son, Landon, increased their land ownership to over 10,000 acres of land by the end of the war.

Upon John Carter's untimely death in 1781, his son, Landon Carter, inherited the home and the Carter's wealth.

Following in his father's footsteps, Landon Carter made his mark also on the political, military, and business fronts. He was fighting the Cherokee at the siege of Fort Watauga by the age of 16 and had also signed the Watauga Petition. He was on the battlefield during the Revolutionary War, attaining one of his most notable accomplishments acting as a lieutenant during the march to Kings Mountain by the Overmountain Men.

After the war, Landon Carter became Speaker of the Senate and then Secretary of State of the "Lost State of Franklin" (1785-1789). He later returned to the North Carolina legislature, but was soon to come back to the new state of Tennessee, representing Washington County at the first Tennessee State Constitutional Convention. Locally, he built the first iron forge in Carter County, in addition to two or more water powered mills.

In addition, Landon Carter, and his wife, Elizabeth, were the parents of six children, most of whom moved on to notable careers. Carter's importance to this area of East Tennessee is evident, as Carter County was named for him in 1796 when this new county was formed from a portion of Washington County. This was the same year that Tennessee became a state. The town of Elizabethton was named for Landon Carter's wife, Elizabeth.

The Carters entertained notable visitors. The well-known French botanist, Andre Michaux, documented his visit to their home in his journal in a 1796 entry. He commented that he had visited, "Major Carter of Watauga, at whose house I had lodged several years previously with my son, and Colonel Avery."

In May of 1800, Governor John Sevier noted in a diary entry, that he had attended a ball at General Landon Carter's. Landon Carter died on June 9, 1800, not long after this visit.

At Carter's death at the age of 40, his wife, Elizabeth, maintained control of the estate until approximately 1810, at which time it was subdivided amongst his heirs. She did remain in the house, living with various family members until her death in 1841. Carter's business interests passed to his eldest son, Alfred Moore Carter, who built a home in Elizabethton in 1819. This home is still standing across from the Carter County Courthouse and the Department of Agriculture.

The Carter Mansion stayed in the ownership of the Carter family until approximately 1877, when William S. Thomas acquired the property from Mary C. Carter, the widow of General James T. Carter. His 160-acre tract, which included the house, remained his farm and residence until his death in 1885. At this time, his wife, Jane,

remained at the house until her death in 1924, though much of the land had been sold prior to William's passing.

Subsequently, the property passed through many hands until family descendants sold it in 1973 to the state of Tennessee. At this time, 4.2 acres, along with the house and the Carter/Thomas cemetery, were sold to the state.

In an effort to document the occupation of the property at the Carter Mansion, the state of Tennessee engaged in two archeological investigations. Dr. Carl Kuttruff, then with the Tennessee Division of Archeology, directed the first in 1973. This project was limited in time and funding, but quickly indicated that a more in-depth study was needed. Artifacts and remains showed this to be a very complex archeological site, with occupation noted from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, in addition to one or more prehistoric occupations. During 1977, additional archeological work was conducted on the site during the renovation and preservation of the house.

Today, the Carter Mansion is a satellite of Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area in Elizabethton. Both sites offer a wide variety of interpretive programs that are planned to share the history, the natural attributes, and specialties of 18th century. Garrisons, workshops, and festivals take place throughout the year, along with nature study programs and concerts featuring the traditions of the region. The "Friends" group of the park, The Watauga Historical Association is highly involved in the programming effort and is the mainstay behind "The Wataugans," Tennessee's official outdoor drama.

The Carter Mansion is open to the public by appointment from September through May. It is open daily from mid-May through August.

A complete listing of the special events planned for 2003 may be acquired by calling Sycamore Shoals at 423-543-5808. To schedule a tour of the Carter Mansion, please call 423-543-6140.

(Jennifer Bauer is the park interpretive specialist for Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area and the Carter Mansion. She is the author of Roan Mountain: A Passage of Time and a frequent contributor to The Tennessee Conservationist. Her newest book, Exploring Nature in the Southern Appalachians: A Unique Activity Guide, is scheduled to be released later this year.)

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